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ABSTRACT

In spring 1998, the Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) committee at Abilene Christian University (Texas) began an 18-month review of the school's Writing-Intensive (WI) courses. From the initial review, it was noted that two problems needed to be addressed: in spite of regular workshops and group meetings, the teachers worked in isolation resulting in classroom practices that varied widely from discipline to discipline; and faculty viewed the WAC director as the judge and arbiter of all writing standards on campus. This paper tells how these problems were addressed, specifically how the WAC program (which had developed into a director-centered program) was reconstructed into a WAC discourse community. The paper first explains that the strategy for in-depth review of the WI courses was to interview WI instructors and identify needs and concerns they had. According to the paper, findings fell into three categories: Instructor Attitudes about WAC; Writing Practices in WI Courses; and Problems/Needs Expressed by WI Instructors. The paper finds that, as a result of the interviews, the WAC committee had a clear understanding of the needs and practices in the WI courses, and with this information the WAC Committee developed guidelines for WI courses that included minimum requirements for courses and a recommendation for a Writing Center. In addition, it states that the workshop structure was reorganized to use more collaborative presentations; the WI curriculum was revised; and WI instructors reported using a greater range of writing in their classes. Appended are findings from collaborative interviews, and guidelines for WI courses. (NKA)

Creating a Discourse Community with Writing-Intensive Instructors.

by Nancy W. Shankle

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Creating a Discourse Community with Writing-Intensive Instructors

Introduction

In spring 1998, the Writing Across the Curriculum committee at Abilene Christian University began an 18-month review of our Writing-Intensive courses. From the initial review, we concluded that there were 2 problems that needed to be addressed. In spite of regular workshops and group meetings with WI instructors, the teachers worked in isolation resulting in classroom practices that varied widely from discipline to discipline. This was particularly evident in workshops as instructors discussed their current practices in the courses. The second problem was that faculty viewed the director of WAC as the judge and arbiter of all writing standards on campus. As the committee discussed these issues, I realized we were constructing the WAC environment on campus following the model long held in many classrooms where the instructor holds all knowledge and transmits knowledge to students who work independently on tasks assigned by the instructor. In other words, our program had developed into a director-centered program.

It is not difficult to see how this problem developed. Most faculty are trained to work within the discourse community of their field and "know the language, epistemology, research, and dissemination practices accepted by disciplinary colleagues" (Cambridge, 9). As Barbara Cambridge points out, "Few faculty members, however, consciously operate in a discourse community " which crosses disciplinary boundaries (p. 9). Many faculty, in fact, are not even aware of the differences in one's discourse community. Since they were trained within their specialization, they expect all faculty and students to know their expectations, or

they renounce having any expert knowledge and relinquish the true knowledge of writing to the experts in the English department.

However, WAC is by nature an interdisciplinary program, and—along with faculty development programs—one of the few truly interdisciplinary programs on most campuses. In fact, the WAC program at ACU is housed within our Adams Center for Teaching Excellence, which is frequently the site of interdisciplinary faculty meetings on teaching and learning initiatives. In spite of the interdisciplinary mixing of faculty, our WAC program had devolved into a model that failed to capitalize on the advantages of interdisciplinary goals.

To address these problems, then, we decided to reconstruct our program into a WAC discourse community. Such a community would, according to Bruffee, work together using "the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions" (p. 642). Moreover the center of authority would be redirected away from the director to shared authority among the participants in the discourse community.

Interview Process

Our strategy for in-depth review of the WI courses was to interview WI instructors and identify needs and concerns they had. Previously, we had contact with WI instructors once or twice a semester through workshops and luncheons. For the interview process, though, we conducted 1 1/2 hour interviews with three WI instructors per session. These interviews were scheduled during noon and instructors were treated to lunch. We began the interview with open-ended questions and allowed the conversation to move freely. Specifically, we asked professors 1) what are your current practices in WI courses; 2) what is the nature of your WI course and its relationship to the curriculum; 3) what is the nature of writing in your discipline in general; 4) what are your expectations regarding the teaching of

writing; 5) what are the current constraints in this course to the effective teaching of writing; and 6) what needs do you have regarding assistance or training in the teaching of writing.

Toward the end of each interview, we presented the list of common guidelines developed by Christine Farris and Raymond Smith and asked for the instructors' input on how to structure guidelines at ACU. We scheduled the meetings every 3 weeks during an 18-month period and drew on our findings to develop workshop topics during this period as well as to refine our interview process. For example, we learned to put a statement in the invitation that the purpose of the interviews was formative for WAC Committee members and "not evaluative of the WI instructors." We also asked instructors to bring copies of syllabi and writing assignments for easy reference during the interview. At the end of the 18-month period, we followed-up with a questionnaire to verify our findings from the interviews.

Findings

Our findings fell into three categories: Instructor Attitudes about WAC, Writing Practices in WI Courses, and Problems/Needs Expressed by WI Instructors.

Instructor Attitudes

- Most instructors lacked confidence about teaching writing even within their discipline.
- Instructors wanted to know more about teaching writing. The most common topics requested were developing writing assignments, evaluating writing, writing process and revision, handling lower-skilled writing students, and helping international students.

Writing Practices in WI Courses

- Most instructors knew very little about informal, writing-to-learn activities and focused their courses on formal, out-of-class assignments.

- Many instructors used major research paper assignments as the primary writing task in the class other than essay questions on exams.
- Almost no one used web-based, PowerPoint, or other electronic media for writing assignments.
- The percent of course grade based on writing varied from 20% to more than 90%.

Problems/Needs Expressed by WI Instructors

- Classes are too large for the workload, especially paper grading. Some classes had up to 48 students per section. These instructors did not have graduate assistants or student graders.
- Students need motivation to take writing courses, *and writing in general*, seriously .
- Faculty need help working with students out of class on reading, writing, and critical thinking.
- One professor requested WAC workshops for *students* to attend.
- Departments did not always support the WI courses. In many departments, the course was a senior course with a heavy workload in content material, and the instructor had no time or incentive to develop units to support writing goals.

Outcome of Our Assessment

As a result of the interviews, the WAC committee had a clear understanding of the needs and practices in the WI courses. Using this information, the WAC Committee developed guidelines for WI courses that included minimum requirements for courses and a recommendation for a Writing Center. During the 1999-00 academic year, these guidelines were presented to WI instructors, department chairs, deans, the General Education Council, and the full faculty for approval. Because these guidelines developed out of the interview

process and with full involvement of the WI instructors, they were approved with relatively little opposition or revision.

The second proposal—for a Writing Center that would support the WI instructors—was also accepted. We hired a full-time director in fall 2000 and developed a program to serve all students on campus. The freshman English and WI instructors have a referral process for students enrolled in their courses.

Beyond these two proposals, the WAC Committee had other important outcomes. One, we reorganized the workshop structure to use more collaborative presentations, drawing on faculty expertise that we learned about in the interview process. Thus, we paired a Bible professor with a Journalism instructor to lead discussion on evaluating research papers and a theater instructor with a math instructor to discuss designing writing assignments. Second, we revised WI curriculum; since the university developed a writing assessment that focused on formal types of writing, faculty wondered why so much of our discussion in WAC workshops dealt with writing-to-learn activities. We will continue to discuss writing as a learning strategy, but recent workshops have focused on teaching strategies for formal writing. Third, because of our discussions in these interviews, our WI instructors have reported using a greater range of writing in their classes, not just the formal research paper assignment.

Future Goals

We have learned that the interview strategy was successful in creating a discourse community among the WI instructors in the WAC program and that it helped to break down resistance to developing guidelines for the program. However, the turnover in teaching assignments requires that the interview process be an on-going process to maintain the

discourse community and the unity among the WI faculty. Thus, we will schedule another round of interviews with incoming faculty as well as plan luncheons with the purpose of maintaining the discourse community among the active WI instructors. By repeating this process, we hope to set goals to revise curriculum, especially to support initiatives to integrate more writing in the courses and provide additional support to faculty.

As mentioned earlier, one instructor requested workshops for students to attend. At first, we thought this was the instructor's way of abnegating his responsibility for teaching writing in his course. Upon reflection, though, we decided that the Writing Center could offer short courses or mini workshops on various topics to support the instruction which takes place in the WI courses. We have not implemented this idea, but we do plan to work on it this next academic year.

Conclusion

The advantages of the interview method were the exchange of information among the faculty being interviewed with the WAC committee members and the development of a discourse community through shared beliefs and values regarding writing. As a committee, we learned much more than a questionnaire or other means of assessment would have provided. The interviews were truly an exchange of information and redirected the flow of information from being one-way to being interactive. This outcome supports Kenneth Bruffee's collaborative learning theory about the value of establishing a discourse community to talk about writing.

Our assessment-driven culture requires us to assess our program and use the results to improve the program. The interview strategy was a viable assessment process for our WI courses and yielded valuable information that allowed us to close the loop in the assessment

cycle; that is, we developed guidelines, developed the Writing Center, revised curriculum, and impacted instructor attitudes to writing. The interviews also provided useful data to support our proposals as I interacted with administrators who want to use data and assessment results in their decision making.

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Appendix A: Findings from Collaborative Interviews

General

- Collaborating with WI instructors through interviews proved to be an effective process to determine needs and set goals for the WAC program at Abilene Christian University.

Instructor Attitudes

- Most instructors lacked confidence about teaching writing even within their discipline.
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Appendix B: Guidelines for Writing-Intensive Courses

Definition of WI Courses

Writing-Intensive courses integrate instruction and practice in writing into upper-level content courses to assist students in becoming effective writers in a specific discipline. They provide a variety of contexts for writing, both formal (e.g., research papers, laboratory reports, and book reviews) and informal (e.g., journals, in-class responses to readings, and writing-to-learn activities). They help students to understand the writing process, expectations of writers in diverse settings, and key concepts about written discourse in their discipline.

Nature of the WI Course

In recognizing the diversity of the various disciplines that offer Writing Intensive (WI) courses, we do not believe we can formalize a required number of papers or words written in one semester. Instead, we wish to emphasize that a WI course needs to include writing in the overall course philosophy. Thus, we make the following recommendations:

- The class should be capped at 25 students to allow for the commitment of time and energy that an instructor must make to ensure that a class is truly writing intensive.
- The class should be a junior/senior level course, required by all majors, and be taught within the major.
- The syllabus should indicate that this course is designated as a WI course and writing should be listed as a course competency.
- Each program should identify its WI course in the university catalog.
- The instructor should use multiple approaches to writing in a course, such as writing to communicate, writing to learn, or writing to evaluate student progress.
- The instructor should include some level of instruction about the writing process, such as finding sources (if research paper), drafting, peer or instructor review, revision, and regular feedback about writing.
- Writing should be included as a percentage of the course grade (at least 30%). Most disciplines would be expected to do more. This means that writing is used in the evaluation of students (out-of-class written assignments, in-class essay exams, daily grades/informal writing, etc.)

Expectations of WI Instructors

- Instructors should be full-time faculty with appropriate terminal degree or comparable experience in their field. This recommendation recognizes that one goal of WI courses is to teach students the disciplinary expectations of writing in their field.
- Instructors should seek to be informed about the writing abilities of students that are relevant to potential employers. This means that instructors should ask “what kinds of writing will students be asked to do in their jobs?” and “how can instructors incorporate these writing tasks in their classes?”
- Instructors should seek to be informed about writing instruction by attending campus workshops, reading about WAC, or learning about writing instruction within their own disciplines.
- Instructors should identify and refer students who need additional help with writing to Writing Center.

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